

Communities of practice for social systems strengthening to improve child wellbeing



Investing in Early School Years: Strengthening School-Based Support Services

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South Africa’s children face overlapping challenges, including poverty, poor nutrition, mental health issues, exposure to violence and inadequate care and parenting skills. These factors limit their ability to learn and thrive. Although national policies promote intersectoral collaboration to promote learning and overall child wellbeing, gaps in alignment between schools, health, and social services leave many children and families unsupported.

The Community of Practice (CoP) for Child Wellbeing piloted a four-year intervention (2020–2023) among foundation-phase learners in six schools across Gauteng and Limpopo. The CoP model used a school-based support system and made use of a digital tool to assess child wellbeing and then practitioners provided tailored interventions to high and medium risk children and their families.

The problem

- 1. Multidimensional needs of children**
Children require holistic support across various domains, including income, food, health, education, and safety¹. These interconnected issues hinder growth and learning.
- 2. Policy-implementation gap**
Policies like the **Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP)** mandate multisectoral services, but inadequate investment in resources, staff, and poor coordination hampers implementation. For example, Gauteng has only 147 social workers for 2,200 schools.²
- 3. Fragmented service provision**
Siloed operations across health, education and social services impede collaboration. Other barriers include fixed mindsets, lack of leadership support and inadequate interdepartmental agreements or training to foster teamwork.
- 4. Lack of holistic assessments**
Integrated assessments of children’s needs are scarce, limiting the ability to plan and deliver tailored interventions. This data gap undermines efforts to improve school-based support services.

The CoP Model

The CoP model applies a “whole-child” approach, placing children and their families at the centre of its theory of change. It emphasises collaboration across disciplines, including social work, psychology, health, and education practitioners in providing tailored support to high and medium-risk children. Key steps include:

- **Detailed child assessments:** Identifying risk factors across health, education and psychosocial domains.
- **Tailored interventions:** Services such as food programmes, health screenings, parenting training, psycho-social support and teacher support workshops.
- **Ongoing monitoring:** Tracking progress over time to ensure sustained improvements.

¹ Patel, L., Sello, M., Haffjee, S., Mbowe, S., Sani, T., Graham, L., Gunhidzirai, C., Pillay, J., Henning, E., Telukdarie, A., Norris, S., Ntshingila, N., Raniga, T., Zembe-Mkabile, W., Nyathi, L., Nesengani, T., Setlhare-Kajee, R. & Bezuidenhout, H., How well are our children faring? A longitudinal assessment of child wellbeing in the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Johannesburg schools over three waves from 2020 -2022, September 2023. Available at: <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CoP-Research-Report-Wave-3.pdf>

² Perold, H. and Delaney, A. (2024). Report on an interdepartmental governmental meeting held to discuss mechanisms for scaling up and institutionalising the Community of Practice approach. Johannesburg: Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg. Available at: https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/CSDA_-_CoP_-_Interdepartmental_GovernmentalReport_-_A4_-_Oct-2024_-_2.pdf

Key findings

The CoP intervention yielded notable results³:

- **Health and nutrition:** Improved caregiver responsiveness and vaccination rates, though malnutrition persisted due to broader socioeconomic factors.
- **Education:** Caregivers reported improved academic performance, but foundational numeracy and literacy challenges remained.
- **Psychosocial support:** Increased parental engagement and improved parent engagement were observed. However, exposure to violence at home and in communities remained high.
- **Impact on child wellbeing:** Statistically significant improvements were noted in areas supported by tailored interventions, such as social work and family strengthening programmes.

Policy implications

To scale and institutionalise the CoP model, key actions include:

- **Strengthening School-Based Support Teams:** Establish care protocols and enhance integration of services.
- **Systems collaboration:** Develop interdepartmental agreements to share resources and expertise.
- **Human resources:** incrementally increase the ratio of social workers, psychologists, nurses and paraprofessionals working in schools to support children.
- **Capacity building:** Equip staff with skills for multidisciplinary collaboration and data-driven decision-making.
- **Digital tools:** Use tools like the Child Wellbeing Tracking Tool to identify and prioritise service provision for at-risk children.
- **Cost-effective scaling:** Pilot more affordable models leveraging existing government staff and resources and partnering with civil society and private social responsibility programmes.
- **Investing in early grades is crucial:** there are no dedicated interventions and resources for the Foundation Phase. Strengthening school-based support teams can deliver essential remedial and preventive services to ensure no child is left behind.

Conclusion

Investing in early school years through models like the CoP can disrupt cycles of disadvantage, reduce inequality, and improve long-term outcomes for South Africa's children. By fostering intersectoral collaboration and strengthening school-based support services, the CoP approach offers a roadmap for scalable, sustainable improvements in child wellbeing.

Visit our website for more information <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/> or contact Dr Matshidiso Sello matshidisos@uj.ac.za

³ Patel, L., Sello, M., Haffejee, S., Mbow, S., Sani, T., Graham, L., Gunhidzirai, C., Pillay, J., Henning, E., Telukdarie, A., Norris, S., Ntshingila, N., Raniga, T., Zembe-Mkabile, W., Nyati, L., Nesengani, T.V., Setlhare-Kajee, R., Bezuidenhout, H. How well are children faring? A longitudinal assessment of child wellbeing in the COVID-19 pandemic in selected Johannesburg schools over three waves from 2020-2022. Johannesburg: Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg. September 2023. Available at: <https://communitiesforchildwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/CoP-Research-Report-Wave-3.pdf>

